

Honey Isn't Vegan, But These Alternatives Are Better for Bees

By Hannah Sentenac



Photo courtesy of Bee Free Honee

Honey, that magical gold liquid produced by our wee bee friends, is not considered vegan. Saying so might make some omnivores cock their heads and question: why not? It doesn't hurt the bees, right?

Wrong. In short, bees produce honey as a food source for themselves — not for humans to put atop their granola. “Honey is made by bees for bees, and their health is sacrificed when it is harvested by humans,” explains **Elena Orde of The Vegan Society**.

The issue of commercial honey production and its effect on bees isn't just something for vegans to worry about, however. Everyone should be concerned about the decline of honeybees and excessive worldwide demand

for the sweetener, says **Melissa Elms, co-owner of Minnesota-based Bee Free Honee.**

She and co-owner **Katie Sanchez** make a plant-based “honee” product using organic apples. The duo’s business got a boost after appearing on Shark Tank and winning support from three of the Sharks; these days the company’s four flavors of honee are available in stores nationwide.

According to Elms, the majority of modern-day honey production is unsustainable and severely detrimental to bee populations.

To meet the insane American honey demand (an estimated 450 million pounds per year), around 60 percent of honey is imported into the U.S. Unfortunately, overseas sourcing can be questionable, and many of the bees have been fed on nutritionally deficient corn syrup and (in some cases) pollen patties, says Elms. “A significant number of U.S. producers then mix this ‘imported honey’ to stretch their volumes and increase profitability.”

In addition, in order to keep pace with demand, commercial beekeeping operations in the U.S. truck bees all across the country to pollinate crops in a process known as “migratory beekeeping.” They drag them from cold weather to hot; exposing them to new parasites and psychological stress; and having them pollinate monoculture crops which can’t provide the diverse nutrients bees need.

Ideally, bees would live in a stationary hive with a three-mile radius to pollinate, gather nectar, make honey, and raise baby bees. This is the kind of local beekeeping Elms and team support wholeheartedly. One of Bee Free Honee’s key goals is to “enlighten growers and promote on-site beekeeping initiatives.”

Colony Collapse Disorder (aka CCD, a phenomenon where all bees disappear from a hive leaving only the queen and a few stragglers behind) and the widespread death of bees is no mystery, she adds, when you look at the global honey-making machine. “And yes, pesticides and GMOs are a huge part of the equation, but until we address the entire issue, we will never really solve the problem,” she adds.

Eating more honey is not the answer. Taking better care of the bees, is. In Elms' words: "We can live without honey, we can't live without bees."

Luckily, Bee Free Honee is an option for honey lovers who want to give the bees a break. It's now available in stores including Whole Foods, Wegman's, and Sprouts, and comes in original, ancho chile, mint, and slippery elm. It serves as a 1 to 1 ratio for traditional honey in recipes, and each bottle of the product helps to save over 7,500 bees.

There are other options for bee-loving buyers, too. **Just Like Honey Gluten-Free Rice Nectar, by Suzanne's Specialties**, is made with brown rice syrup, maple syrup, agave and other natural flavors, and can be used in place of honey in tea, on toast or anywhere else.

Or, if you're into DIY, you can try a **vegan pear honey recipe**. The simple concoction uses only three ingredients, and creates a smooth, sweet spread that'll meet all your honey needs. Alternatively, you can **cook up apple juice** to create a super simple, bee-friendly syrup.

Agave nectar, maple syrup and brown rice syrup can also all be used as sweetener substitutes — although they don't have that unique honey flavor. For that, you'll need to stick with Bee-Free Honee or one of the other options.

But opting into a honey alternative might be a wise idea, because — let's face it — the bees need all the help they can get.

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